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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the role of open universities in the developing world, particularly al-Quds Open University (QOU) in Jordan which serves Palestinians. An introduction notes the rapid expansion in higher education enrollment in the developing world and the demand for education due to changing labor conditions. The paper goes on to compare traditional and distance teaching universities and to discuss the QOU and its role. The QOU serves the needs of the Palestinian people who have been turning increasingly to higher education to qualify for employment. Education has become the most important means for social and economic advancement, but geographic dispersal, the occupation of Palestine, limited access to secondary education, and the absence of institutions of higher education in Palestine have made higher education difficult to obtain. The design of the QOU has a number of features which emphasize skills, quality, relevance, and content in order to meet the needs of Palestinians within their social context and labor market. The QOU will be closely integrated into the life of the student and his community. The emphasis of the program is on making the pursuit of knowledge possible for all members of society. The combination of science with a social and political consciousness aims to concentrate the imagination, will and resources of the Arab states on the solution of fundamental socio-economic problems. (JB)

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Role of the Open Universities in The Developing World

al-Quds Open University (A Case Study)

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I. INTRODUCTION:

During the past four decades, there has been a world wide expansion in the mumber of universities and university student enrolment. Some 50 million students were enrolled in universities during 1981/1982; of these, around 19 million were enroled in the universities of the Third World. The number of students has been doubling every eight years.

The expansion of systems of higher education has been accompanied by an increase in the variety of topics taught, in the diversity of new teaching methods and in the rise of specialized universities. Universities have generally pursued two paralled goals: The production of new knowledge through scholarship and research; and the disemination of this knowledge to society through educational programmes.

Traditional universities are geared for small-scale and personalized education; this is expensive both to the institution and to the student. The number of high quality teachers is small; and even when available, they can only teach a few students at a time effectively. In the Third World there is considerable demand for higher education which cannot met by traditional institutions. Here the need is for high quality education on a large scale.

The pressures on the educational system which have been generated by demand and limited resources contributed to the evolution of distance teaching universities (DTU).

Today, however, all jobs are being transformed daily. Those who cannot cope with the changes become unemployed; factories and offices close, and entire industries disappear. Continuing education facilities have expanded in response to these challenges. Continuing education may be provided, of course, by traditional universities in evening courses. But it is expensive and difficult for most students to travel long distances to attend a course.

The great demand for higher education and the impact of technology change have been powerful forces in motivating the concept of taking education to the home of the student rather than bringing the student to the university. In high quality distance education universities, the objective is to concentrate considerable resources on a few courses, and to industrialise the entire process of education. if the preparation, organization adn support system are of a high standard, then the student can acquire a valuable education.

II. TRADITIONAL AND DISTANCE TEACHING UNIVERSITIES:

It is clear that the two different forms of institutions supplement and complement each other. Each form has a number of special positive and negative characteristics. For example, DTU's are not economical if the number of students falls below about 3000 to 6000 students per degree course. Thus courses with limited enrolment are best taken care of by traditional universities (TU) unless special circumstances dictate otherwise. These circumstances consist of social reasons such as reaching handicapped and immobile students and young house-wives who cannot leave home. They may also consist of professional reasons such as reaching employed individuals (e.g. teachers), as this would be the only way for them to improve their qualifications and performance.

When enrolment is high, DTUs are much less expensive to run than TUs. They therefore provide a useful, necessary and economical service in fields where there is much demand. TUs, on the other hand, are best suited for a small number of students in specialized fields.

DTUs and TUs are fundamentally interdependent. DTUs utilise on an extensive scale the services of the professors, researchers and facilities of TUs to prepare courses, to tutor students, and to evaluate and monitor performance. A chief instrument for DT education is the recorded course which makes use of printed and audio visual materials. In high quality DTUs, considerable investment is made in the production of course materials to meet exacting academic standards. TU faculty and students often utilize these teaching materials.

In many countries DT students may also transfer to TUs after completing two or more years of higher education. In this manner the DTU can help the TU by relieving admission pressure of the first two years, and by inputting transfer students to the third and fourth year classes.

III. WHY THE AL-QUDS OPEN UNIVERSITY?

Distance teaching aims to relieve the pressure on traditional universities and to bring higher education within reach of the employed and those who are otherwise constrained. Furthermore, DTUs serve effectively and economically to alleviate the pressure on enrolment in TUs; they also provide continuing education. All these considerations apply to any society, including that of the Palestinians. But because of the special conditions of the Palestinians a number of additional consideration add logic and force to the concept of distance teaching.

Since 1948, Palestinians have been turning in increasingly large numbers towards higher education in order to qualify for employment; education has become the most important means for social and economic advancement. The conditions of geographical dispersal, the limited access to secondary education and, until recently, the absence of institutions of advanced higher education in Palestine have rendered this

quest for higher education extremely difficult. Of course, the assistance of Arab States in facilitating access to their national universities has made it possible for many Palestinians to complete their higher education.

In addition to these major obstacles and difficulties, the occupation of Palestine has resulted in a wide variety of educational problems. It has been recognized during the past twenty five years that the education which Palestinian receive does not equip them to cope with the social, economic and technical problems they face. This grave situation must be corrected, for otherwise it will become impossible to build a viable economy that could sustains a Palestinian population of 8 million by the year 2000.

The entire area of Gaza Strip and the West Bank is merely 7000 sq. kms. This small area, combined with limited natural resources, makes it imperative to develop alternative economic activities. Only a massive vertical and economic development of human resources during the coming 20 years could overcome this challenge.

Such rapid development calls for a major educational revolution within Palestinian society. Because educational change is slow, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) realizes that there is no time to lose in initiating all the necessary institutions and programmes for fulfilling such a goal.

The importance of higher education calls for a strategy and a national programme to convert each Palestinian into a student, every home into a learning centre, and every community into a university campus. The objective of the QOU is to provide a quality higher education that is relevant to the needs of the Palestinian people.

It is obvious that althogh the QOU is a university promoted by Palestinians, it is first and foremost an Arab university. The QOU expects to extend its services to all the Arab World.

IV. THE QOU AND THE WORLD OF WORK:

The high demand for manpower in the oil-producing countries from 1948 until around 1980 had had a powerful impact on the development of Palestinian manpower. During the early part of this period the region suffered from a shortage of university graduates and skilled manpower. The continued expansion of the educational systems, throughout the Arab World and the poor performance of Arab economies flooded the market with unemployed university graduates. Since 1980, the downturn in oil income has sterngthened the tendencies towards economic retrenchment. The world of work to which the Palestinians were accustomed between 1948 and 1980 has changed irreversibly.

The demands and requirements of the market place are now more specialised and sophisticated. In other words, in order for Palestinians to secure employment in a regional labour force, they must be able to offer a level of services higher than those that can be secured at a low cost from others.

Palestinians have limited or no direct influence over the national policies of the countries in which they reside. Thus they cannot undertake any formal manpower planning. Instead, they have to respond to challenges. They have to possess an excess of capabilities and creativeness to adopt to rapidly changing circumstances.

This is why excellence in education is supremely important. Palestinians were employed in the 1948 - 1980 period because they possessed skills that were not widely available in the region. Today these skills are plentiful. The chalenge is to seek capabilities that are in short supply. These will always be a shortage of superior, creative and inventive business men, scholars and scientists in all fields.

Two broad areas are in principle accessible to Palestinians: employment in host countries; and employment in Palestine. The two are complementary and in many ways have one important element in commmon: the need for persons who possess entrepreneurial and problem - solving skills. It is already well established that the Isarelis pursue a policy of positive discrimination against the employment of educated Arabs in the occupied territories. Thus any employment there would have to be in the private sector; the emphasis would have to be on quality, imagination, expertise and skills that are of importance in the creation of enterprises.

The QOU plans to experiment and develop the appropriate arrangements and means to fulfill its mission. The mission set for the QOU is to research, identify, design and prepare a system of relevant and quality programmes that contribute to the education of Palestinians. The fundamental place of the QOU in the development of Palestinian social, economic and cultural life is in the power of the ideas and learning imported by its faculty, as well as in its effectiveness to deliver this knowledge. The design of the QOU has a number of novel and important features which emphasise skills, quality, relevance and contents.

V. THE QOU AND THE FUTURE:

The QOU represents a new type of university. It will be closely integrated into the life of the student and his community, partly because it takes learning to the home of the student and partly because of its openness. The flexibility of admissions and the speed with which a student progresses, bring higher education within the reach of every adult who is capable and willing to study. The emphasis of its educational programme with the twin objectives of

relevance and qulity removes the false barriers between the world of learning and the world of work. The continuing education programme emphasises the theme that there is no end to learning. The main force of the QOU is possibly its didication to make the pursuit of knowledge accessible to all members of society.

The second half of the twentieth century has been named the Age of Information in industrial countries; for the first time in history, more than 50 percent of the GNP of these countries is accounted for by research and development, and by information processing, transfer, storage and handling. As the Arab Wrold advances, the importance of educational technology, translation industry, software invention, publication, engineering design and consulting, leisure and entertainment will grow accordingly. More than 150 million Arabs are expected to be enrolled in kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools and universities in the year 2000; the demand for textbooks, deskslaboratory equipment, teachers, managers and researchers is expected to be considerable. All this depends on knowledge, which is the business of the QOU.

The QOU is also a solution to the educational problems of the Palestinians. This innovation is also set to serve the broad developmental need of the Arab States. The combination of high science with a social and political consciousness aims to concentrate the imagination, will and resources on the solution of fundamental socio-economic problems.

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